

Back to School: Education as Entertainment

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A Review by

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Henry: Where have all the children gone? Two weeks ago I was being plowed over by teenagers as I walked along the promenade, and now here it is a Thursday and there's not a kid in sight. It's a new school year, and it's another year of comedy, drama, heartbreak and victory—and I'm just talking about the movies. From "Fast Times at Ridgemont High" to "Mean Girls," the drama of "Friday Night Lights" and the horror of "Carrie," I love them all. I want to attend "Rushmore" with Jason Schwartzman, and blow off class with Matthew Broderick in "Ferris Bueller's Day Off."

Sims: I suppose one needed to have liked high school to appreciate those films.

Henry: Not really. I mean some of those movies were about the painful embarrassment of high school, the outsiders... Was that what it was like for you?

Sims: Let's just say when you show up on your first day with a Spider Man lunch box, and kids can be awful mean.

Henry: Well, we are talking about high school.

Sims: Oh... Right...

Henry: Wait, so you had a Spider Man lunch box in high school? No wonder you hated high school.

Sims: Can we continue?

Henry: Sure. Well, like films set in a courtroom or a hospital, a high school is the perfect setting to catch people in emotionally heightened situations. But high school movies work so well because going to school is such a uniquely communal experience. The bully, the nerd, the jock, the mean girl – these may be stereotypes, but they are ones that everyone can immediately identify. No one understood that better than the late great John Hughes. With every character he wrote, from the princess in "The Breakfast Club" to the outsider in "Some Kind of Wonderful," Hughes understood that the pressures of being adults were just as complex as the pressures of being in high school. A lesson those of us out of school are all too quick to forget.

Sims: One of my favorite films, "Paper Dreams," illustrates these pressures beautifully. The film had its world premiere at last year's Film Festival, and I've subsequently screened it to the critical acclaim of students at schools from around the state. And "The Cartel" is a probing feature documentary about New Jersey's school system that spurred great dialogue from the audience in Cape May during its South Jersey Premiere. The closest I get to a Hollywood favorite school film is "Napoleon Dynamite."

Henry: So take a look at some of your favorites and drop us a line about why you like them so much. Meantime, there's a library of films to help you relive your old school days—that is, if it's not too traumatic to even go there.